{ See Note at end. }

UNITY

CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT,

FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

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THE TWO TEMPTATIONS.

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GEN. III. 6, 7: And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, * * she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened.

MATT. IV. 1: Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil.

I bring these two passages together for the sake of a striking coincidence which they present—none the less interesting for being but seldom noticed—between the narratives of the Old Testament and of the New. In the Old Testament, where man appears in his moral infancy, at the very threshold of his career, as the first individual experience, stands temptation. In the New Testament, where man appears in his moral maturity, stands once more, upon the very threshold of the narrative, as the first individual experience—temptation. Whether we open the Old Testament or the New, therefore, the same form confronts us at once; attending man in his natural state and attending man in his spiritual state; attending him in his moral creation and awaiting him still in his moral perfection; his companion in his earliest innocence, his companion equally in his maturest virtue; present in his first struggles, present still in his last triumph; the first form that greets him in the glad Eden of childhood, the last form that greets him in the lonely desert and the Gethsemane of manhood.

I have called this a coincidence; yet it is something more. It is only because behind every such historical parallel, there lies of necessity some deeper meaning which invites our search, that I ask your attention to these two familiar narratives.

The first narrative, as you know, is of the simplest kind, a child-like statement of fresh and child-like thought; intelligible if taken simply as a pre-historic tale, and obscure in its meaning, if at all, only through the effort to force its artless language into the dogmatic jargon of a later age. Says our narrative, in effect: This primitive pair, living first in innocence, were tempted by the serpent to eat of the fruit which God had forbidden them to touch; and, having eaten, "their eyes were opened," and they became "as gods, knowing good and evil."

In other words, the immediate conse-

quence of this act of disobedience was their knowledge of good and evil. Before the act, therefore, they had no knowledge of good and evil. Before the act their eyes were not opened. That is to say, by this act of disobedience their moral consciousness began. Not being moral creatures before, they became moral creatures through the first temptation and first violation of divine commands.

Unfortunately for a correct understanding of this interesting scripture narrative, its simple meaning has been almost fatally obscured by the bad theological name which has become attached to it. It has been styled, without scripture authority, the "fall of man." But "fall" from what? we ask. If man was virtuous before, then this act of disobedience could not (as the narrative asserts) have first opened his eyes, and taught him the difference between good and evil. If he was not virtuous before, if his eyes were then opened for the first time (as the narrative assures us) then there could certainly be no fall, for there had been no virtue from which to fall. Indeed, as if in confirmation of this view, it is to be noticed that no moral principle is appealed to when that first command is given, but only the instinct of fear. Man is not told "if thou eatest thereof it will be wrong," but "if thou eatest thereof it will be dangerous—thou shalt surely die." In other words, there was no moral principle, nor any knowledge of right and wrong, to appeal to. That came first with the eating of the forbidden fruit, and this seems to be what is meant when the Deity himself says, "Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil."

It cannot be too clearly understood that the term "Fall of Man," is an entire misnomer. In the Old Testament itself we find neither the name nor the thing. According to the literal scripture there could have been no moral offence in eating the fruit, because they knew nothing of right and wrong until they had eaten. There was no fall from virtue because there was no virtue from which to fall. There was only innocence; moral unconsciousness; out of which into moral consciousness, the step, through whatever means it be taken, must needs be an advance.

It may be asked, indeed, could not the temptation have been resisted, and thus the same result have been attained and moral consciousness reached by victory over evil, rather than by surrender to it? Unquestionably it *might have been.* But was it? We are not considering here an abstract problem; we are not determining whether in the nature of things virtue can be reached except through experience of evil; we are only making out the facts of a scripture narrative. Unquestionably, then, on the first appearance of temptation, there might have been a stern resistance to it, and so man might have triumphed over the first allurements of evil. But did he? And had he done so what would it have proved? Simply that the human race was morally perfect at the start, and needed no earthly discipline. The result showed, on the other hand, that the race was not morally perfect at the start; that it was morally undeveloped; that moral perfection was the very problem its earthly career was to solve.

This temptation, then, with the surrender to it, marks not the first step in man's downward course, but the first step in his upward course; marks the passage, not out of innocence into guilt, but out of ignorance into knowledge. It marks, in fact, in the Old Testament history, the hour of man's moral creation; the hour when he first recognized and assumed the responsibility of his moral nature; the hour when, out of a mere creature of the dust, carrying in his nostrils the breath of life, he became "as one of the gods, knowing good and evil." If we could take this first living man as the conscious representative of the human race that, according to the narrative, was to proceed from him, could we suppose, that is, actually present to his thought the complete human development which his life was to initiate, this would mark the hour when the thought of man's moral liberty and moral responsibility first burst, with lightning flash, upon the soul—when the vision of human destiny, of the high possibilities of human virtue, yet of the perils and

struggles, the mingled glory and shame, through which it must be reached, first rose upon man's sight?

Can we wonder that the infant soul sunk trembling to the earth, before such a vision? Can we wonder that the fair garden in which they had carelessly wandered, seemed overcast by a sudden cloud, and the voice of an avenging God was heard speaking from among the trees? Is it strange that they turned away as if stricken by sudden guilt, from the scenes of their thoughtless innocence, and the gates of their earthly paradise seemed to close forever upon their retreating forms? Was it strange if the very guilelessness from which they were so rudely aroused, seemed now to rise up in terrible rebuke, and break forth into speech against them? "Go forth into the world," it said, "it is henceforth your home; into the world, which is no Eden of unbought happiness and untempted innocence, but the stern forbidding field of moral conflict, where the soul is to learn the use and the scope of its perilous powers. Man is not to become man without an effort. He is not to win his manhood for naught, but only at its full cost. Nor are years or centuries too long for coming to his full heavenly stature."

But could they have chosen, we may perhaps ask, would they have chosen this? Ah! could they have chosen, indeed, no doubt they would have shrunk from these untried possibilities, and clung to their blissful paradise still; and the world would have known no temptation and no surrender, no moral consciousness, therefore, and no progress towards the infinite perfection. Happily it was not for them to choose. The hour came; the tempter spoke; innocence listened and yielded (as indeed untried innocence must), and the human conscience was born.

But whatever may be the importance of the first of these two temptations, a still greater interest naturally attaches to the second. Nor can it surprise us if with this higher interest we find also a deeper obscurity; or if we find ourselves approaching this narrative with a tender reverence which hardly dares to scrutinize the facts too closely. Of one thing at least, however, we may be sure: that a secret passage of inward experience like this is above all things genuine and real. Whatever explanation we may put upon it, if it comes from Jesus at all, it is a disclosure to the world of what was to him one of the sternest crises of his life. And when the holy ones of the race unveil to us, even for an instant, the secrets of their spiritual life, it is for us not to deprecate or apologize, but gratefully to read the story as it is told.

In one of those hours of private converse with his disciples, so many of which must have remained unrecorded, Jesus seems to have confided to them the inward agitations which attended his entrance upon his ministry. Looking back, as he does, out of the midst of life's activities, he sees, as he confesses, one dark and awful struggle, out of which his soul had arisen to the full consciousness of its holy purpose and the full mastery of its powers. A slight event though it may have been in itself, colored to his purer thought beyond its actual blackness, a momentary questioning merely, which the common soul would have forgotten in one hour, yet to this nobler spirit it seemed the very wiles of the great Tempter; the serpent of the fair garden whispering again in man's ear, and striving to lure the soul from its final entrance upon its divine prerogatives.

It is of the very opening of his ministry that Jesus speaks, after the quiet season of childhood and youth was past, when he began to feel within him the stir of a higher purpose, and when the soul's great powers began to clamor for recognition, and claim a wider field for their activity. Beneath the waters of baptism, as he tells us, the very heavens seemed to open to assure him of his mission, and the spirit of God to descend to consecrate him to his sacred calling. Then as he retires into the desert to commune with those new thoughts, and mature the growing, purpose of his soul, comes the severe trial, whose allegorical form is so familiar to us, yet whose incoming is so dark.

Explain the incident as we may, it certainly marks a sacred hour in man's

inward history. And as the human soul looked, for the first time, not as in that earlier experience upon the moral liberty before it, but upon diviner prerogatives, upon holy rights of which it had never dreamed before, upon those native faculties of which it had but just become conscious, which assert the soul's heavenly birth and its very kindred with Deity, is it strange that it should have shrunk back appalled, and the very splendor of the vision should overwhelm it? Can we not understand how, instead of hastening forward with rapture to a work never undertaken before, Jesus should have started back, almost with dread, before its untried duties? "Oh, these perilous powers," he seems to say, "why were they entrusted to me? These glimpses of a higher truth which call all past belief into doubt, why have they come to agitate my soul? These whispers of a diviner birth, this summons to a holier destiny, why have they come to break the calm of my earlier life? Oh, the terror as well as the joy which it is to feel one's self the son of God. Who is equal to so high a thought? Who can take upon himself such fearful powers? The mightier they are for good, so much the mightier are they too for evil. How shall I be found using them? Will it be for myself or for humanity? In the service of Satan or in the service of God?"

Without wishing to press upon you my own interpretation of a passage which bears to different readers such different meanings, I cannot help calling your attention to this point of analogy between these two temptations, whereby each lends a certain significance to the other. As the first seemed to mark man's reluctant entrance upon his moral liberty and moral manhood, so this second marks the soul's recoil before the first consciousness of its divine liberty and divine manhood. Fain would it abdicate its rights rather than assume such dread responsibilities.

Does not the supremacy of this truly royal soul lie precisely here; that it rose from this struggle undaunted; that it calmly accepted the trust before whose greatness at first it shrunk in awe, and bore henceforth its divine title without dismay? And is there anything which marks more plainly the distance of the common soul from Christ, than that we surrender to the temptation from which he arose in triumph and in strength?

We surrender to this temptation, I say. Am I not right? Is there anything from which man shrinks in greater dread than from the full assumption of his moral and spiritual manhood? Its consequences he dare not meet. Above all other temptations he may rise in calm superiority—self-denial may be easy to him, sensual passion or gross indulgence may offer him no allurements. He may employ life's largest opportunities and lend his energies their widest scope. But the soul's diviner rights, its perfect moral freedom, its yearning for spiritual perfection, he hardly dares to face. The obligations involved in such rights he is eager rather to evade than to assume.

Is not something of this kind true of us all? Is there anything harder for us to meet than the austere exactions of a life of moral truthfulness? Is there anything which we dread so much as the privilege which is ours of loyalty to the heart's native convictions? Anything from which we shrunk so much as acting up to our own highest ideal of truth and right? Whether at home or in the street, among our friends or in the world, are we not more willing to escape from our better thoughts than to follow them? Is there not always a nobler manhood, a finer womanhood than any which in our acts we acknowledge? Is there not always a diviner self of which we are conscious but which we do not recognize? Is there anything more distressing to us than the necessity of listening to the questioning which beset our sacred beliefs, yet which are themselves, perchance, the whisperings of a higher faith?

Oh, these perilous gifts of ours! Oh, this divine manhood whose glory crushes us! Oh, this awful freedom, more exacting than any slavery! Oh, these immortal rights, which we have not the courage to assume!

It is no mere coincidence, then, which places a temptation on the first page of

the New Scripture as well as of the Old. It is to remind us that temptations belong not to lower natures only, but to higher as well; that with the greatness of the divine gift indeed goes the greatness of the temptation; that man cannot rise so high in the scale of being but he finds subtle allurements pleading with him to lend his heavenly powers to an ignoble service. To baser natures baser enticements, which the nobler soul never feels; to the higher nature higher enticements, which the baser can never know. Not, indeed, because the world is wicked, and men's hearts are naturally sinful. Not because a spirit of evil lurks in God's fair universe and mocks his loving providence. Rather, because the limits of the finite and the actual press everywhere upon our infinite desires, and strive to bind and subdue the high ideal of our souls. Here lies the one temptation from which not one of us escapes; in this lure held out to our timidity and our fears; in this trembling desire to content ourselves with the present and not try the rough hazard of the future; in this coward dread of the vague possibilities of evil which are the conditions of all high achievement; in this timorous reluctance to take upon ourselves the awful burden of our moral and spiritual responsibility.

But in the face even of this temptation comes a strengthening thought: that there was one who met this temptation and overcame it; one whose soul no such fears could subdue, but who accepted the full prerogative of his divine mission; one who found out what a joy and glory it was to be called the child, the son of God.

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